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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000757

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SUNDAY SCUFFLE AT OPPOSITION RALLY: EARLY START TO ARMENIA'S "HOT POLITICAL SPRING?"

REF: RFE/RL REPORT, 28 March 2004

¶11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶12. (SBU) Heckling, a fistfight and the subsequent arrest of four opposition supporters overshadowed the start of a Justice Bloc-sponsored political rally in the northern city of Gyumri on March 28 (ref). Police eventually restored order and the rally and later closed-door consultations between opposition and local leaders finished without further incident. Last Sunday's events, the most violent since the opposition rallies during last year's Presidential campaign, have sparked speculation that opposition rallies scheduled for this April will reveal a contentious political atmosphere and could lead to more unrest. Opposition leaders and some political analysts are pointing to the Gyumri incident as proof that forces loyal to President Robert Kocharian are "running scared" and will resort to shady tactics to discredit the opposition. End Summary.

HECKLING, VIOLENCE AND ARRESTS KICK OFF RALLY

¶13. (U) An opposition rally in Armenia's second-largest city, Gyumri, got off to a tumultuous start March 28 when pro-Government and pro-opposition demonstrators exchanged punches, launched eggs and hurled insults, ending in four arrests. A group of 10-15 women (referred to in press reports as "known prostitutes" and rumored to have been enlisted for the event) joined the rally holding anti-opposition banners and clashed with opposition supporters shortly after the start of the event. According to reports from Embassy sources, the violence began after hecklers threw eggs and set-off firecrackers during People's Party President and "Justice Bloc" leader Stepan Demirchian's opening address. A group of unidentified men, two of whom were allegedly plainclothes police officers, approached Demirchian and engaged in a fistfight with his bodyguards and others. Police arrested four opposition supporters (including the driver of Justice Bloc leader Albert Bazeyan) following the scuffle.

DEMIRCHIAN: VIOLENCE A "CLEAR PROVOCATION"

¶14. (SBU) Despite conflicting reports, Demirchian and a handful of Justice Bloc representatives eventually did complete their rally and met with local supporters in closed-door consultations regarding future demonstrations in Yerevan scheduled for sometime in early April. Demirchian referred to the violence as a "clear provocation" from the Kocharian. Later that night, Demirchian made high-profile appeals to local authorities to release the four men arrested during the scuffle. (Note: Post has no information on the detainees' treatment during their imprisonment or updates regarding their release. End note.)

POLICE: "UNABLE TO GUARANTEE PROTESTORS' SAFETY"

¶15. (SBU) Organizers of the opposition rally claim that local police stated in a letter before March 28 that they were "unable to guarantee protestors' safety" in the event of a rally. This rare police statement, coupled with early press reports that multiple plainclothes policemen may have taken part in the heckling, have given rise to speculation of GOAM involvement (local and/or national) in the anti-opposition events on Sunday. In addition, sources tell

the Embassy that a suspicious "violet Mercedes-Benz" was parked close to the rally from which GOAM sympathizers distributed eggs and encouraged their equities to "make it look like a real protest from both sides."

COMMENT

¶ 16. (SBU) It remains unclear what, if any, role government authorities played in the March 28 disturbances during the Gyumri opposition rally. Political analysts close to the Embassy speculate that the incident had its roots in local politics. They tell us that local authorities may have staged the events as a symbol of political repentance in order to ingratiate themselves with the Kocharian administration. The subsequent political fallout and press frenzy, however, suggest that future rallies will now serve as an important barometer of the opposition's support and the Kocharian administration's propensity for self-restraint. Whether the incident was a part of local politics or a national power play, all eyes are now focused on future opposition rallies in Yerevan and what may be the "hot political spring" rumored to dominate Armenian politics in the coming months.

WALKER